Phyllis Yarwood

Don't Sell Your Beliefs

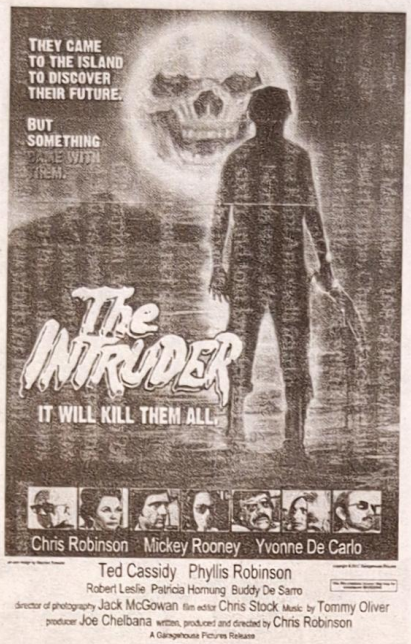
SAMUEL CLAESSON

Phyllis Yarwood had no idea that fate would bring her to Hollywood, where she was one of the most gorgeous brunettes in the entertainment industry. After graduating from Newport Harbor High School, Phyllis enrolled at Orange Coast College where she played Cordelia in *King Lear* to critical acclaim. A trained ballerina, she had no ambitions about being an actress. Her beauty won her a bevy of pageants with titles that included Miss Firecracker, Miss Disneyland, Miss Newport, Miss Anaheim, Princess of Easter Week, Fish Fry Queen, Queen of the Orange County Fair, Queen of Hearts, and Maid of California. One of her greatest achievements in pageantry was being crowned Queen of the California State Fair in 1954 on the 100th anniversary of the fair. The numerous photographs taken of her at the event were placed in a time capsule, which is scheduled to be reopened in 2054. Her sole film that decade was a starring role in *The Noble Experiment* (1955), also known as *The Big Drink*, where she was billed as Phyllis "Yum Yum" Yarwood. The experimental film attempted to utilize the latest technology so that audiences could essentially taste what was presented to them onscreen.

On July 22, 1966, she married actor Chris Robinson. The two would become an amazing filmmaking duo who'd star together in several of their own films, including *Catch the Black Sunshine* (1974), *Thunder County* (1974), *The Intruder* (1975), and *The Great Balloon Race* (1977). While these were not successful financially, they are considered cult classics. The Robinsons divorced in 1976. Phyllis Yarwood, who's now Phyllis Robinson, lives an active life in Costa Mesa, California. She's a devout Presbyterian, and her faith is important in her life.

Samuel Claesson: What prompted you to become an actress?

Phyllis Yarwood: A friend of mine in high school thought I was pretty, so she, without my knowledge, entered me in a beauty contest that was being held at a local radio station. I was shy and had no desire to do it, but I felt obligated. I ended up winning, and continued to do pageants until being crowned Queen of the California State Fair. That put things in motion. I never studied acting, though, not once.


THEY CAME TO THE ISLAND TO DISCOVER THEIR FUTURE.
BUT SOMETHING CAME WITH THEM.
The INTRUDER
IT WILL KILL THEM ALL.
Chris Robinson · Mickey Rooney · Yvonne De Carlo
Ted Cassidy Phyllis Robinson
Robert Leslie Patricia Hornung Buddy De Sarro
director of photography Jack McGowan film editor Chris Stock Music by Tommy Oliver
producer Joe Chelbana written, produced and directed by Chris Robinson
A Gainsborough Pictures Release

Whenever I acted, I just did the role truthfully. That seemed to work just fine.

SC: You were reportedly with Paramount Pictures. What were things like on the studio lot?

Phyllis Yarwood: I actually didn't sign a contract with them because I was underage. I was invited to a conference at the studio to discuss a possible deal with them. They seated me with Bud Pennell [Larry Pennell], a great actor who became a lifelong friend of mine, and John Derek. I later had a meeting with Y. Frank Freeman, who was the head of the studio. He said that he'd love to cast me in something, and invited me to return in six months when I was 18. I had a bad feeling about it, so I never returned.

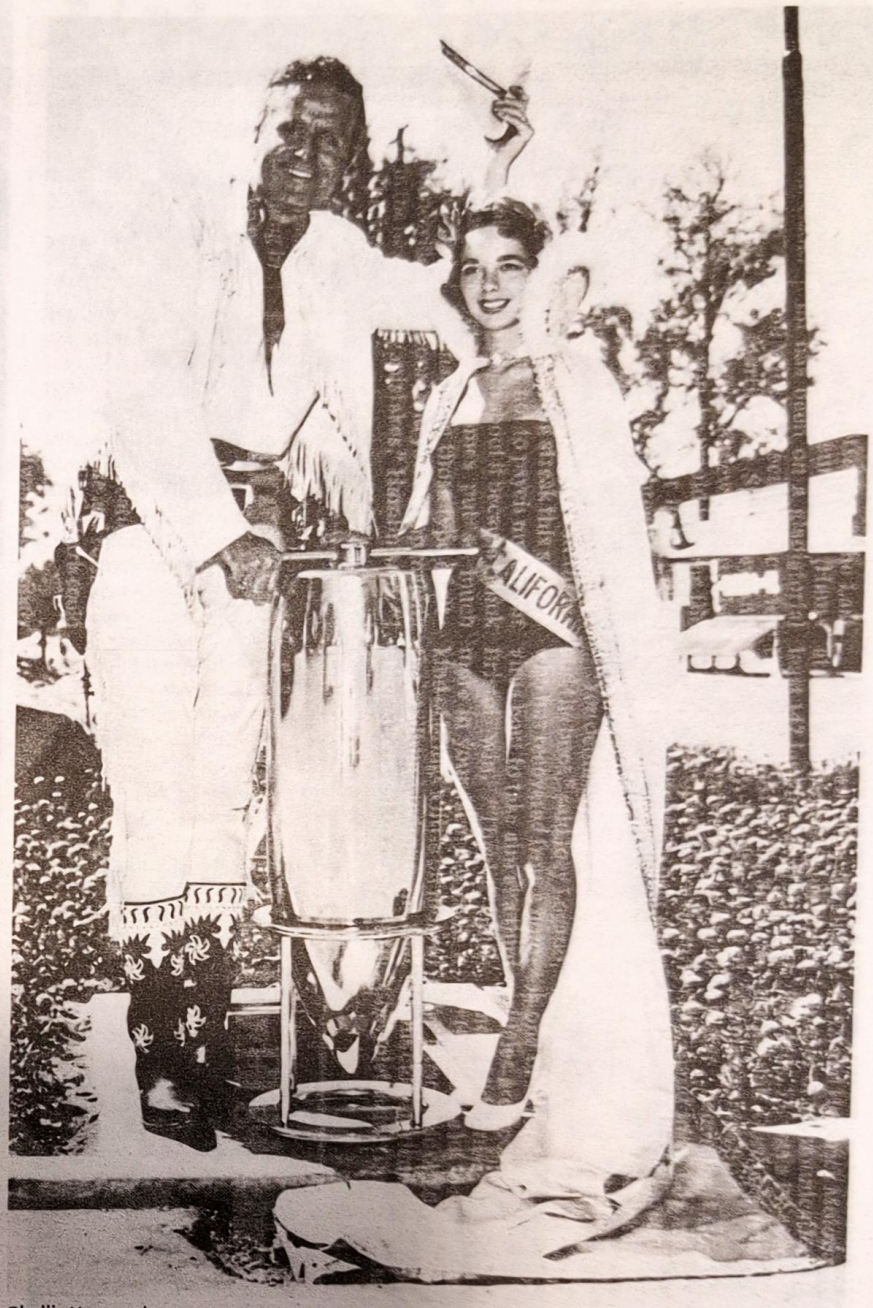
SC: You starred with Tom Graeff in *The Noble Experiment*, a film that was labeled as ahead of its time. It was lost for decades, but was recently found by filmmaker Elle Schneider. What can you tell us about it?

Phyllis Yarwood: It should've remained lost. It was filmed by people who just wanted to give themselves a name in the industry. The plot was about a chemist who didn't like his angry mother-in-law, so he concocted a serum with his wife—that was me—which when poured into the water supply would make everybody happy. Tom, who wrote, directed, produced, and starred in it, tried to add gimmicks that were outrageous, like it being "the first film that you could taste." It was set to premiere at the Lido Theater in Orange County, but there were delays because the technology that allowed you to taste the stuff in the film simply didn't exist.

SC: What was the premiere like?

Phyllis Yarwood: The audience seemed to like it. They didn't complain, at least. I'd imagine that they were disappointed because the advertised tasting technology wasn't at the theater. I hadn't thought about it in years because it wasn't important to me. I was cast because I had a bit of name recognition and the role required a gorgeous brunette. I honestly don't even think I auditioned for it.

SC: You did several films in the 1970s after a two-decade hiatus. What prompted that?



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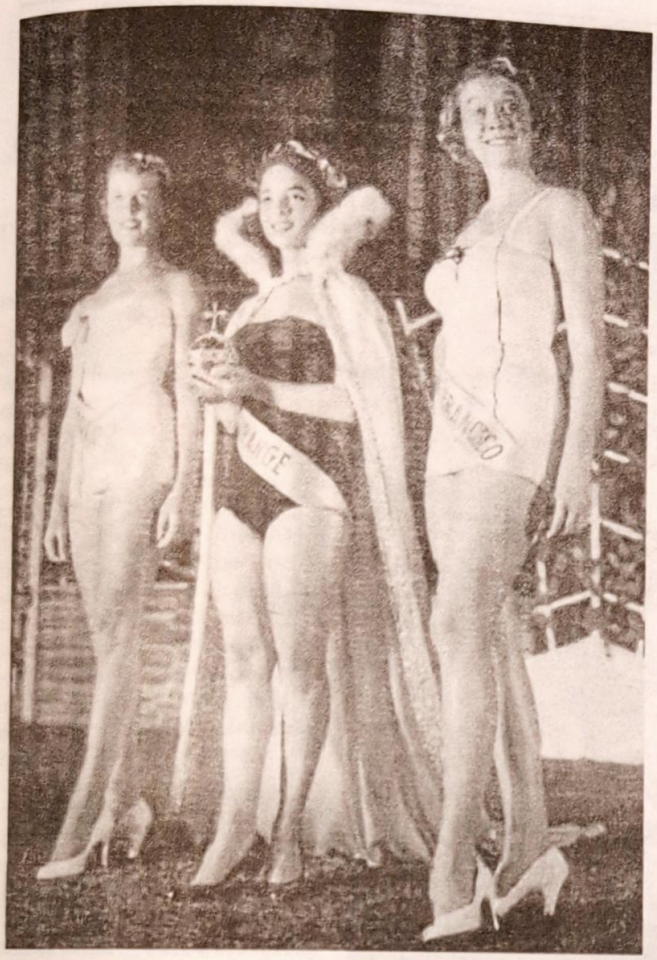


ABOVE: Phyllis Yarwood, center, is chosen Maid of California. The runners-up: (left) Carol Lee Daley and Virginia Haldeman (right).
ABOVE RIGHT: Tom Graeff and Phyllis Yarwood in The Noble Experiment (1955).
RIGHT: Phyllis Yarwood and Governor Goodwin

Phyllis Yarwood: In 1966, I married Chris Robinson, who was doing several movies. He told the press that I had been his secretary prior to our marriage, which wasn't entirely true. We were an always-busy twosome, though. We had homes in California and Florida, and I'd often do commercials in Florida for brands like Cheerios. He wanted to get into directing, and he cast me in some of his movies.

SC: What did you think of Chris Robinson as a director?

Phyllis Yarwood: I thought he was just fine. As somebody who did a bad movie, I can tell you that the movies we did together were actually very good. They didn't have the budgets or publicity that other movies had, but they were very entertaining.

SC: One of those films was *Thunder County*, where you acted with Mickey Rooney and Ted Cassidy. What did you think of them?

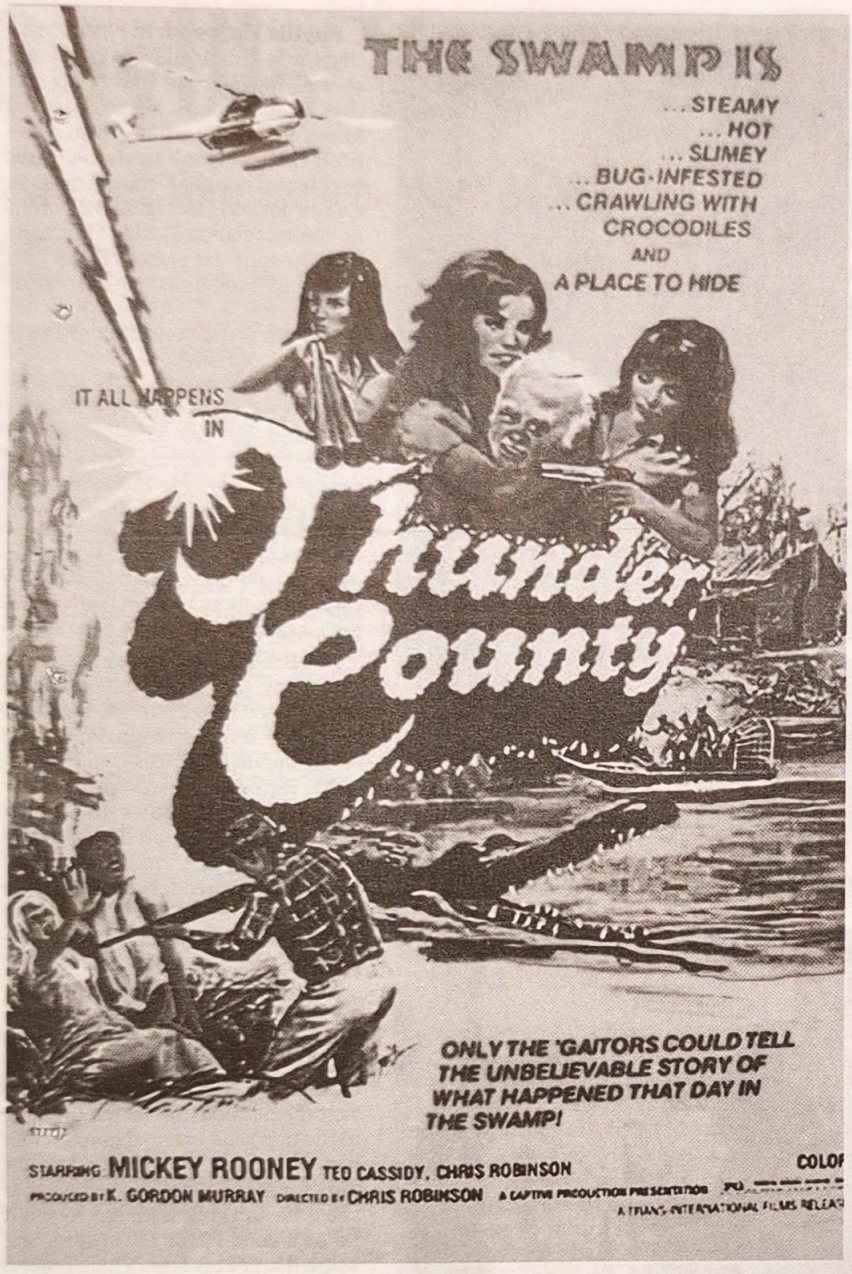
Phyllis Yarwood: I can't say that I met anybody more self-centered and egotistical than Mickey. We loved Ted, so we used him for several of our movies.

SC: Why did you stop acting?

Phyllis Yarwood: I decided to focus on our children. I was active with my church, too. Chris and I eventually divorced, but we still keep in touch.

SC: Was there an opportunity that you pursued, but didn't get?

Phyllis Yarwood: After getting my diploma, I was contacted by somebody from a company named Black Gold Productions. They wanted to do a screen test, so they sent me a limousine which took me to the house of a woman named Lillian Albertson. She was a prominent director in the theater. She said that she'd be working with me to see if I'd be a good fit for the studio. She wanted to see my legs, which I found odd because there were hundreds of photographs of me which bore my legs. After a brief conversation, I was told to return the following day. They sent a limousine again, of course. It was during the drive that the chauffeur asked me if I had met Howard Hughes yet. I thought about it for a bit and realized that this must be an audition for Howard Hughes. I knew that I wasn't interested. I had a blonde friend who was on contract with Hughes, and she was, in her words, miserable. There were other women with him who weren't put in


THE SWAMP IS
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...HOT
...SLIMEY
...BUG-INFESTED
...CRAWLING WITH CROCODILES
AND
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PRODUCED BY K. GORDON MURRAY DIRECTED BY CHRIS ROBINSON

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CAMEO APPEARANCES BY CAB CALLOWAY
PHYLLIS DILLER BERT PARKS
FRANKIE LAINE NORM CROSBY

any movies. He'd just sign them and keep them idle. I confronted the woman [Lillian] who'd been vetting me, and she confessed that this was an audition arranged by Hughes. She told me that I seemed like a sweet girl and shouldn't sign with him. Her exact words were, "Unless there's an actual film in your contract, don't sign anything." Hughes had men follow me for months afterwards to monitor my activity.

SC: There's been a lot of controversy regarding the #MeToo movement and the treatment of women in Hollywood. What's your opinion on it? Was anyone inappropriate towards you?

Phyllis Yarwood: There was an agent who wanted to represent me, but he requested that I do things I wasn't comfortable with. I saw other women go through a lot worse. It's good that they're getting the opportunity to tell their stories.

SC: What advice would you give to aspiring actresses?

Phyllis Yarwood: I'd say don't give yourself away, don't sell your beliefs, and don't lose your integrity.

Phyllis Yarwood on the official souvenir program booklet for the California State Fair.